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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN'S OPPOSITION REMAINS FOCUSED ON 2005
ELECTIONS

¶1. (SBU) On April 3, EUR DAS Matt Bryza held a roundtable meeting with Azadliq Bloc leaders Ali Kerimli, Lala Shovket, and Sardar Jalaloglu along with Musavat chairman Isa Gambar. Almost to the exclusion of any other topic, the Azadliq bloc leaders clearly remained focused on the November 2005 parliamentary elections. Kerimli and Jalaloglu asked Bryza repeatedly about the USG-funded exit poll, claiming that the selection of constituencies was not random and that there had been a conspiracy in the poll's delayed results. The two also resuscitated charges that one of the local partners of PA Consulting was biased toward the government and therefore skewed the results of the exit poll. All three of the Azadliq leaders also claimed that President Aliyev was more brutal during the campaign and election than Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, with Shovket claiming at one point that the GOAJ was headed in the direction of North Korea and Turkmenistan. The three also told Bryza how difficult it was for them, as the leaders of the "democratic forces," to continue to attract supporters and keep up the fight in the face of the West's alleged declining support for democracy.

¶2. (SBU) Bryza said he was aware how difficult it was for the opposition leaders. He reaffirmed USG support for the opposition's efforts to advance democracy, and reiterated the U.S. would keep pressing the GOAJ and President Aliyev to strengthen democracy and hold free and fair election reruns on May 13 as a necessary step in elevating U.S. - Azerbaijan elections. However, the three Azadliq bloc leaders countered with hyperbolic claims that Azerbaijan was as undemocratic as North Korea was. Bryza also stated, along with DCM, that there was nothing sinister about the conduct of the exit poll; it had been an objective, transparent measure of the election in the 65 districts in which it was run and had spurred some GOAJ action when fraud was found. Gambar, speaking last, told Bryza that his party would partake in the May rerun elections, and therefore chose to focus on the Nagorno-Karabakh negotiations rather than the November election. Bryza responded that it appeared the preparation work that had been undertaken by all sides over the past two years was beginning to bear fruit and that the chances for a settlement remained real.

¶3. (U) DAS Bryza has cleared this message.

HARNISH